



Assessing Spelling in Writing Workshops Part 1: Thinking Through the Assessment

Katie DiCesare

My mind has been circling the issue of spelling and word study this year. Specifically, I wonder how I can look at my students' writing to help me further their learning of words? How can I assess what high frequency words they are spelling correctly? How can I monitor where to go next with looking at word parts and sounds in words? After lugging home 22 bright red and overflowing writing workshop folders with two months' worth of student writing in them over holiday break, the folders just sat in a pile. Instead of diving in their stories, I knew I needed to have some organizational tool that could help me record and look back at individual spelling successes and confusions.

I began to think about just what expectations I have for my students as "spellers." I want my first graders to be fluent with high frequency words. I want them to be brave -to stretch sounds in words independently and use familiar word parts in their writing. With these ideas in mind, I reread my district's learning targets and parts of Spelling K-8 by Diane Snowball to check my thinking.

I was reminded of three areas that are important to first grade spellers. These areas are spelling high frequency words, spelling phonetically (hearing and recording sounds in words) and spelling word parts (onsets, rimes or chunks, endings, digraphs, etc.). With my mind focused on these three areas, I began to create an assessment form that would help me record my findings. You can access the form I created [by clicking here](#).

High Frequency Words

I knew I wanted my assessment form to be one page, easy to read, and include student spelling successes and confusions. I started with a list of the 100 high frequency words mentioned in Snowball's Spelling K-8. I knew having all the words on one page would make it easy for me to check off (multiple times) when a student had success spelling the word in his/her daily writing. Next to this list of high frequency words, I created a rectangular box labeled high frequency confusions. Here I am able to write the misspelling followed by an arrow pointing to the intended spelling. For example, *thay* -- *they* and *cod* -- *could*. By noting these words and misspellings, I am able to quickly see the confusion and the intended spelling.

Word Parts

The middle of the assessment form includes an area to record what Snowball categorizes as word parts. Parts of words include onsets and rimes. The onset is part of the word before the first vowel (*b* in *bat*) and the rime is the part of the syllable from the first vowel onward (*at* in *bat*). Common onsets include single consonant sounds, digraphs and blends. Thinking of my first grade students, I decided to include an area to record the common digraphs (*ch*, *sh*, *th* and *wh*) on the form with room to add blends that the student is writing successfully. I also included an area for rimes and I listed the vowels so that I could easily sort the rimes underneath them. For example, under *|a|* I have listed words students are spelling successfully that have common rimes beginning with the many sounds of *|a|*. Words like *cat*, *man* and *day* are listed on student A's form because she has spelled the rime correctly within her writing. To the right of the word parts box, I have a rectangular box labeled word part confusions. This box allows me to record the word parts student A is confusing like *nite* -- *night* or *ceese*-*cheese*.

Word Families, Interesting Words, Familiar and Unit Words

The last section of the form allows me a quick look at other areas that are important to me. I am using the phrase *word families* to refer to a group of words with related meaning that often have different suffixes or prefixes added to it (Snowball, 1999). In this section of the form I included the suffixes *s*, *ing* and *ed*, knowing these are common endings first graders read and often include in their writing. I find this section especially helpful for my English language learners knowing word families are trickier for them. As I am reading, I like to jot down interesting words they have written so that I have a quick picture of vocabulary within writing as well. For example, I have recorded words like *cooled*, *flowed* and *fierce* on student A's form. Lastly, I added a section for familiar and unit words after actually using the assessment form because I knew my students were using word charts within our room to spell words correctly. For example, I needed to document that they were spelling *Native Americans*, *motion*, and *Christmas* correctly because I had tools in place for them to use within the room.



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Assessing Spelling in Writing Workshop Part 2: Noticing Patterns in Individuals, Small Groups and the Whole Group

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[Editor's Note: This is the second in a three-part series on trying out a new assessment form for spelling development. If you would like to read the first essay in the series, [click here](#).]

Regie Routman writes about assessment in her new book, *Teaching Essentials: Expecting the Most and Getting the Best from Every Learner K-8*. She says, Teachers have to develop a mindset that views assessment not as an end product but as a vital, interactive part of responsive, effective teaching. Assessment is teaching."

Regie's insight into assessment has raised questions in my own teaching about spelling and word study. Recently, I **created a form** that would help me assess spelling within authentic writing. I created this form in response to questions like . . . how can looking at student's authentic writing help me further their learning of words? How can I assess what high frequency words they are using successfully or confusing in their writing? How can I monitor where to go next by looking at word parts and sounds in words? By using this form, I was able to collect specific information about each of the writers in my room. As I looked at the assessments, I began to see patterns in my writers. Here is what I noticed:

Patterns in Individuals

Looking at Michael's form helped me notice right away the successes and confusions he is having with some high frequency words in his writing. He has mastered some two- and three-letter words like *my, me, up, the, to, it, in, are, is* and *we*. Word confusions like *thin--then, thas--this, git--get* helped me see that Michael is trying to stretch through the sounds in these words (unsuccessfully), instead of using other strategies for remembering and writing high frequency words in his fluent writing.

As I was conferring about Michael with my friend and our staff Reading Recovery teacher, I talked with her about how Michael has been recording word endings separate from the base word. For example, *slep eg--sleeping*. She immediately mentioned how he often struggles with segmenting as he reads. The light bulb went on for both of us. Lastly, we noticed that Michael sometimes records (what seem like) unheard sounds in words like, *haos--house, fasch--fish*. After thinking out loud together about what the confusion could be, we decided that Michael was dragging some individual letter sounds (like [h] in *house* and [f] in *infish*) so much that he began adding an extra [a] sound to the end of the individual letter sounds. These successes and confusions help us affirm his strengths and lead us to further questions about where to go next:

1. How can we meet the needs of Michael as a speller?
2. When can we embed mini-lessons to help clear up his confusions during reading and writing workshop?
3. What confusions do we address with him individually?

Patterns in Some Students

As I finished recording spelling information on the last of my writers, my mind had already started sorting individuals with the same confusions. One of the first confusions I noticed in multiple students was the high frequency confusion for *thare--there, where--where and everywhere--everywhere*. After noticing this, I wrote the names of these students on a post it with the confusion.

Another confusion that some of my English language learners were experiencing was the [sh] for the [ch] sounds in words. I noticed these brave writers were trying to write words like *tasht--touched* and *fasch--fish*. I also wrote the names of the students and their confusion on a post it. Another group of students were confused about *win--when* and *wint--went*. My first thought was they were stretching through these words and may benefit from instruction about the --en pattern that I could help them see in other words. Last year, I used a boy in class named Ben. His name was an anchor that we used to help us spell many high frequency words. To me, it makes sense to meet with these students in small groups. So, my next questions are:

1. What strategies would help these students address their confusions?
2. What supports or anchors in the room will support English language learners?

Patterns in Many Students

When I looked over all the spelling forms, I also noticed a confusion many students were exhibiting. In the back of my mind, I knew this information could be useful for whole group instruction since it would support most students. What I noticed was that many of my students were confusing short vowel patterns in words. I counted 14/ 22 of my students had confusion in their independent writing with recording one or more short vowel patterns. This 14 of 22 number

was big for me. I realized that more than half of my writers had some confusion with short vowel patterns. Here are some I noticed:

Bad--bed Git--get Pats--pets Gat--get Latter--letter Spen--spin

Now that I have this information, where do I go next with whole group mini-lessons? How can I use routines I already have in place to support exploration and instruction with short vowel patterns?

The form for assessing spelling in authentic writing has given me a great deal of information about my writers. I have noticed patterns in individuals, small groups and a pattern in the group as a whole. I have posed many questions for myself that I am trying to answer with other staff, professional resources and just plain old trial and error in the classroom. My last article in this series will address the steps I am taking to try to answer these questions.



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Assessing Spelling in Writing Workshop Part 3: Embedding Instruction

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The only way we can teach efficiently and have enough time to teach what's necessary -- curriculum, standards, all discrete objectives -- so all students achieve at higher levels, is to teach multiple skills simultaneously and interactively focusing on the parts needed.

Regie Routman in **Teaching Essentials**

I recently **created a form** that would help me record information about my students and how they are spelling high frequency words, sounds and patterns in words. This form has helped me discover patterns in learning and confusion in individuals, groups of students, and my class as a whole. In this third part of my series on using this new assessment form, I'll explain how I am using the information I have gathered about my students to help me plan for instruction. My goal is to embed spelling instruction and address specific spelling confusions students have within reading and writing workshop routines already in place in my classroom.

Embedding During Shared Reading

One routine that my students and I love is shared reading. Shared reading is the time when we read our favorite stories and poems aloud together. Before embedding spelling instruction into shared reading, I remind myself of what Brenda Parkes writes in her book *Read It Again! Revisiting Shared Reading*: "The first purpose of shared reading is to provide children with an enjoyable reading experience ... the second equally important purpose is to teach systematically and explicitly how to be readers and writers themselves."

I know that most of my students generally read high frequency words with ease. Some of the words they read easily and fluently are not transferring to their own writing (for example, many of the high frequency words that are noticed, practiced, and posted on the word wall). Words like *wint-went*, *win-when*, *thare-there* and *whare-where* are often misspelled in their writing.

I want my students to know that spelling is important in writing and affects how others read their writing. So, I decided to embed some spelling strategies we've practiced into the context of reading familiar "shared" reads.

For example, I grabbed one of our nursery rhyme lap books (published by Seedling Press) so we could look at the word *went*. I used *Jack and Jill* (a nursery rhyme story we've heard again and again). At the beginning of the week, I told students we would reread this book we have already enjoyed, and during this reading I also wanted them to notice that writers pay attention to spelling. Throughout the week we practiced strategies like *look*, *say*, *name*, *cover*, *write* (on our hands) for *went* as we found the word in the story.

I covered up *went* in the story the second day when we reread the story, and we pictured the word and predicted the spelling. Then a volunteer wrote *went* on the cover-up tape. I purposely chose a student who had been misspelling the word. We had conversations about how the word looks and why spelling is important to writers.

Another confusion I noticed is that many students are not transferring short vowel patterns in their writing. I dug out the books that my kids love to read often. We actually have a basket in the classroom library labeled "Books We Love to Read Again and Again." The kids and I have noticed that these stories have repeating words, word wall words, rhyming words, a few words on each page, and pages where pictures match the text on the page.

These books are not leveled books or big books, but addictive picture books that I have a hard time reclaiming from students' personal book bins. I am using newer books like *What Will Fat Cat Sit On?*, *Tanka Tanka Skunk*, *New Socks*, *Where Is the Green Sheep* and older favorites like *Dear Zoo*, *SHHH* and *OH NO!* As we reread *What Will Fat Cat Sit On* (after reading it many times before,) I talk to the students about how we will play a game with some of the words in the story. This sparks their interest and they are ready to notice features of words and specific words. This book has words like *cat*, *dog*, *pig* and *sit*. These are all words they are very familiar with, and all of them contain short vowel patterns (a pattern over two thirds of my students struggled with according to my notes from the assessment form).

I also want to address the specific confusion for *at-et* that I am noticing in their writing, so I ask the kids to help generate words that *cat* helps us spell. They come up with *that*, *fat*, *bat*, *rat* and *Natalie* and we add them to a post-it. I also connect this conversation with a specific piece Jared is writing during writing workshop. I remind him of a conversation we had about how he wanted to write *splat*. We practice saying and hearing *s-p-l* and then *at*. We then add it to the post-it.

We talk about how writers think about spelling as they write their pieces. We put the words on a chart called "Words That Help Us Spell Other Words." We talk about how this chart is a place for writers to go to if they are writing a word that sounds like another word we know.

Embedding During Guided Writing

For my students that have many confusions about high frequency words, or a particular confusion shared by a group of writers, I have been embedding their spelling instruction into guided writing groups. Guided writing allows small-group conversation about words, as well as a space to practice and then attempt the word in the final writing space. It is an interactive writing activity with a small group.

This small-group time allows me to create a dictated sentence that contains words they are struggling with in their writing. For example, the day after a guided reading group where I introduced *The Duck with a Broken Wing* to Michael and another student, we met for a guided writing session to practice writing high frequency words they are reading but not yet writing independently. After checking the spelling assessment form, I noticed these writers needed help practicing the words *this* and *was*. I used these words and some of the ideas from their story to create a sentence to practice: *This duck was going down to the water.*

We talked about the story and which duck it could be, retelling a bit in our conversation and then beginning to write. We started in the practice area (the top portion of a page in a sketchpad that is folded in half) with the *look, say, name, cover, check* strategy for the word *this*. Then I asked students to write it in the circles I drew in their practice area. I asked them to touch and read each *this*. They transferred this to their final writing space (the bottom part of the sketch pad page).

With practice space, we can write the high frequency words *this* and *was* two or three times before transferring then into our final copy area. Guided writing allows us to have other conversations like how |k| in duck sounds like one sound, but is written with *ck*. I purposely put the word *going* into the sentence because I noticed Michael has trouble segmenting words with the *ing* ending. We practiced tapping the beats in our name and then in the word *going*. We counted the beats, and then talked about how words have parts we tap, but the parts come together as one word.

Dividing words into parts helps us to slow down and think about what letters to write first, next and last. We tried saying *going* together and noticed how it is one word with two beats or syllables. The students finished the sentence and reread to confirm their writing looked and sounded right. This small group guided writing allows the kids and I to converse about specific confusions, as well as extend the practice and learning of high frequency words, sounds in words, and patterns in words.

Embedding During Conferencing

I am also embedding discussion of spelling confusions into individual conferences with students. Conferencing is something I have built into reading and writing workshop. When I meet with writers to confer, I always begin with a compliment about the message. Richard Gentry reminds me of the importance of recognizing the message before form. Concentrating only on mechanics and spelling is a trap I have fallen into before (instead of noticing content first).

I often have experienced writers who only write words they feel safe spelling, or writers who write short or less risky pieces to avoid new words. I know that every piece a student writes is a risk, and it is my job to help them see how to improve their writing without scarring the child's identity as a writer. One way I have been conferencing with students about spelling is to target individual high frequency confusions in a student's drafts.

For example, recently Mark was stuck on the word *with* and asked me to spell it as he was in the middle of a book he was writing about wolves and coyotes. I asked him if he saw it on the word wall, but he was having a tricky time finding it among all the words under *w*. He told me he knew it had a *w* and an *h*. I knew then he needed to visually see and practice it.

I pulled out a post-it and wrote the word at the top. I asked him to practice *look, say, name, cover, check* on the post-it. He then wrote *with* correctly on post-it tape and transferred the correct spelling to his writing. The post-it was put on the back of the page he fixed. This post-it is evidence of practice and helps me look back and assess what Mark knows as a speller.

For my writers who are not yet recording many sounds in words or struggle to hear correct sounds in words (like Michael), I am conferencing with them individually and asking them to try a tricky word on a Try It Again card, a blank card with columns to allow multiple attempts at words.

As I look at my assessment forms for spelling needs, I am at first overwhelmed by the confusions students are having. Each child encounters confusions that are individual. I want to fix them all immediately, but I need to be realistic about what I can accomplish in my classroom. I know that I want to be efficient, and I also want the kids to be a part of the noticing and thinking about their confusions. I want to address these confusions within the daily routines I already have in place. What I love about my job is the creative decisionmaking I undertake each day. I know every learner is different, and I find myself feeling like a researcher -- observing, recording, and experimenting with ways I can help clear up confusions for all of my students in the classroom.



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